

THE THETIC ROLE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Husserl often discusses the thetic component of consciousness, the features of consciousness that distinguish different kinds of acts, for example acts of perceiving, acts of remembering, acts of imagining, etc. In particular, Husserl was interested in the difference between acts where we experience things as real and acts in which what we experience has a different status, for example, is experienced as merely imagined or dreamt¹.

The theme was brought up in the *Logical Investigations*², but after Husserl's conversion to idealism and introduction of the phenomenological reduction it took on a new form. All questions of existence and reality are

1. In the *Crisis* Husserl emphasizes the importance of this topic: "The first breakthrough of this universal a priori of correlation between experienced object and manners of givenness (which occurred during work on my *Logical Investigations* around 1898) affected me so deeply that my whole subsequent life-work has been dominated by the task of systematically elaborating on this a priori of correlation." *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Husserliana*, III.1,305.8-15 = p. 274 of the original edition = p. 317 of Carr's translation.

2. In the *Ideas* Husserl writes: "In the *Logische Untersuchungen* they [the posited moments] were (under the title 'quality') taken into the concept of sense (of signification essence) and therefore in this unity the two components, 'matter' (sense, in the present conception) and quality, were distinguished. [Here Husserl refers in a footnote to *Logische Untersuchungen*, V, §§ 20-21, Findlay's English translation, pp. 586-593.] But it seems more suitable to define the term 'sense' as merely that 'matter' and then to designate the unity of sense and thetic character as 'positum' [Satz]." *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Husserliana*, III.1,305.8-15 = p. 274 of the original edition = p. 317 of Kersten's translation, which I have slightly amended.

bracketed in the phenomenological reduction. That they are bracketed does, however, not mean that they are gone. They are there, but we are no longer asking what is real and what is not real. Instead we ask: What is involved in being real? What are the structures of consciousness thanks to which we experience something as real? And how do they differ from the structures of our consciousness when we experience something as dream or phantasy? Indeed, it is one of the central concerns of Husserl's idealism to get an understanding of how the being of the world and its objects is represented in our consciousness.

ACTS

In our normal lives we are absorbed by the world and its objects or we are engaging in other forms of activity. Husserl calls all these activities *acts*. Many acts involve movements of our bodies. Others are intellectual or emotional. They, too, involve physiological processes in our organisms and may be prompted by or lead to bodily acts. They all involve our consciousness.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

In 1905 Husserl got the idea of the phenomenological reduction, which for him is intimately connected with his idealism. The phenomenological reduction starts from our natural, world-directed attitude. Instead of attending on the world and its objects we bracket the objects in the world and are not concerned with them and their existence. Instead, we are focusing on the acts. The aim of phenomenology is to study, in detail, the structures of acts.

NOEMA, NOESIS, HYLE

In focusing on the acts, we discover *three* elements: the *noema*, the *noesis* and the *hyle*. The *noema* is a meaning, a structure, which interrelates all the features of consciousness that go into the act. The noema has several components, one of which is thethetic component, which will be the topic of this paper. However, before we turn to it, let us note that the noema has no temporal coordinates. It contains determinations of the temporal features of the objects of acts, but it is not itself temporal. It can, in principle, be the same in several acts, acts of the same agent that take place at different times or even acts carried out by different agents (although so much of the agent's peculiarities and background and of the spatio-temporal setting is involved in

the noema that in practice no two agents would ever have the same noema, and even for one agent to have the same noema twice would be problematic). The notion of the noema may help us make the notion of an act a little clearer. We can individuate acts by saying that acts are the same only if they have the same noema. Note the 'only if', as we noted, two acts can in principle have the same noema. Since the noema has no temporal coordinates it is not a part of the act. The act has temporal coordinates and can only have parts that are temporal.

The other two elements that we discover when we carry out the reduction and reflect on the act, the noesis and the hyle, are, however, temporal and are parts of the act. In fact, together they make up the act, acts have no other parts. The noesis and the hyle are *experiences* that we have, they have a duration in time, in a special sense that we are not going to discuss here. All acts have a *noesis*. This is a very special kind of experience, which gives meaning, or structure to the act. Husserl calls the noesis the meaning-giving element of the act, and the noema he calls the meaning given in the act. As one should expect, there is a thorough-going parallelism between noema and noesis. An example Husserl gives in order to clarify the two notions is that of a judgment. Philosophers since Bolzano have learned that what we study in logic, are abstract entities called judgments, and not the acts through which we make the judgments. The former are a component in the noema, while the latter include the noesis.

The third element on our list, the *hyle*, are experiences which we typically have when our sense organs are affected, but we also can have in special other situations, for example when we are affected by fever, drugs or nervous disturbances. They form a kind of boundary condition for the kind of noesis we can have in acts of perception. For perception to take place, the noesis and the hyle must fit harmoniously together. Note that we may keep our eyes open and think about something else, for example a philosophical or a mathematical problem. In such a case we may have hyle, but the hyle do not play any role in determining the object of our act. The thetic character of the act is not that of perception, but that of thinking. We are not perceiving.

A central point in Husserl's theory of perception, that we shall not discuss here, is that the noesis is never uniquely determined by the hyle. We can have very different noeses, and perceive very different objects, while what reaches our sensory organs may be the same. One should not say that the hyle are the same in such a case. The hyle are experiences, and not only is the noesis dependent on the hyle, also the hyle will depend on the noesis. There are no hyle that can be compared from act to act where the noesis are different. The important points for Husserl are that perception is underdetermined by what reaches our sensory organs, and that there is nothing given in perception. Perception is directly of objects, and there are no intermediary steps. Neither the hyle, nor the noesis nor the noema are objects that we perceive. The former

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